
TANF ONLINE CLIENT SURVEY

Survey Question: "What's most helpful to you in the WorkFirst program?"

796 TANF and former TANF clients responded to this open-ended survey question. While not everyone was satisfied, about 90% of the comments focused on the help they received, and respondents' comments touched on every major aspect of the WorkFirst program. As one person stated: *"Everything that is provided for us is helping me..."* and went on to specify how helpful it was for her to learn to be on time.

Below is a summary and excerpts in the five key areas commented on by respondents.

DISSATISFIED/DISCOURAGED

"I was not able to find living wage employment. I sent out hundreds of resumes and I must have had 30 or more direct referrals. I did not get one call for interviews. It just does not work."

"Nothing... I know how to look for work and I'm only following this program because I'm being forced to so that I may collect the state aid that I desperately need. I believe the "provable" job search strategy is offensive and demeaning. Believe it or not, some of us have worked many years, decades, and are only here because this economy is horrible. I feel this program looks at all "down on their luck" people as deadbeats who just don't want to work."

ECONOMIC SUPPORTS

Respondents mentioned every conceivable type of economic support we provide, including child care, food, medical, and cash assistance, computer access and support services. They often expressed gratitude that the assistance allowed them to care for their children or stated the program stands between them and homelessness.

"WorkFirst helped make it possible as a struggling, single parent making it, on little to nothing every day. Also for my children and I by paying for transportation costs to and from school and daycare every day. They also helped me with child care so that it was possible for me to go to school full time, and my children also enjoyed going to daycare. It was healthier for all of us and helped me get an education for a new fresh start in a career that could benefit my family and provide a stable life that my new confidence and self-respect can thank WorkFirst for. I have a better outlook on life and my children see the difference that these changes have made by attending WorkFirst and school activities."

"The most helpful part of the WorkFirst program is all the resources that come along with it. Makes finding a job a little easier."

WORKFIRST ACTIVITIES

Every type of WorkFirst activity was mentioned by someone as helpful, including resume building, job search, education, work experience, life skills, issue resolution and Community Jobs. One respondent even praised participation verification. Some respondents mentioned they were aware that these activities cost money and appreciated the investment.

"I like keeping track of hours because it helps keep me on track."

"Recent job history from working through community jobs."

"WorkFirst has helped me gain experience in office related fields."

"The educational opportunity has been tremendous. I feel it is the best opportunity to gain the education and skills needed to get off and stay off assistance."

"They help us look for a job, and they sort of push us to do better in life instead of being on Welfare your whole life."

HOPE, MOTIVATION AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS

71 respondents praised individual WorkFirst staff as being supportive, non-judgmental and helping them through the program. Respondents also mentioned how their peers provided support.

"The motivation to realize, that most boundaries in the work force are one's people unintentionally set for themselves. As well with determination, extra work, and the willingness to ask for and accept help, there are unlimited possibilities."

"Helps me deal with my low self esteem problems."

HELP WITH BARRIERS

Respondents expressed their appreciation for the help they received to address barriers such as health or emotional health problems.

"being given a little more time to take care of family issues i was going through with domestic violence issues effecting the children and i are safety, also received a lot of helpful advice and guidance from case workers"

"I am not required to participate in WorkFirst because I have a waiver because of my special needs child. But I choose to participate anyway. The WorkFirst counselor at the college has been extremely helpful, knowledgeable, and supportive."

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Survey Question: “What could improve the program?”

705 TANF and former TANF clients responded to this open-ended question. Many respondents were aware of the program’s budget constraints, and some respondents advised against imposing strict TANF time limits. One summed up what is needed as: *“Less clients, more funding”*. Some stated the WorkFirst program was okay as it is.

Below is a summary of the key respondent suggestions for program improvement.

- **Resource gaps:** Respondents often mentioned resource gaps, including the need for more help with child care, housing, school supplies, work clothes, doctors and dentists who will take Medicaid, car insurance, and post-TANF tuition assistance.
- **Participation:** People want participation to be in activities that are meaningful to them, such as work experience that relates to his or her employment goals. Respondents often suggested reduced hourly requirements or fewer stacked activities -- describing the stresses and strains that come with not having enough hours in the day to complete all required activities, including not having enough time with their children.
- **Paperwork:** Many people would like the WorkFirst agencies to find ways to reduce paperwork (including participation verification) and to make it more convenient to access benefits like gas cards. For example, people suggested alternative sites for the daily job search sign-in or for places closer to home where they could drop off paperwork. Some found the whole process of participation verification demeaning.
- **Transportation:** Between stacked activities, full-time participation, long commutes and participation verification, many respondents noted that they can’t afford the gas money to meet all of these commitments and the help we provided was inadequate.
- **Education:** Quite a few respondents wanted the opportunity to pursue higher education and four-year degrees without having to combine it with part-time work. Others suggested they receive school breaks the same as other students in the community and technical college system.
- **Peer support:** Quite a few respondents expressed an interest in providing peer support for their fellow WorkFirst parents and suggested we do more in this area.
- **WorkFirst staff:** There were comments that WorkFirst staff are stretched thin, often hard to reach and that some can be uncaring. A couple of respondents shared that they would like to be able to go to one person while others wished they got the same answer from everyone they were working with. Some felt the WorkFirst program was too confusing, while others tired of getting the same orientation message and information repeatedly.
- **Employer outreach:** Respondents suggested stronger ties between WorkFirst and employers. One suggested we help them get employer feedback about why they weren’t hired for a job so they know what areas to work on.

- **Barriers:** Respondents would like more help in dealing with real issues and many wanted more help with overcoming the impacts of their past criminal history. A few suggested drug-testing, while one asked that the state 'get the drug people off TANF'.
- **Community Jobs:** Respondents wanted Community Jobs placements to be available to more people or to last longer. One said that she loved her Community Job placement and was sad when it ended. Others were discouraged when they were not picked up as permanent employees. One respondent stated it was hard on her ego when they let her go.

EXCERPTS

"I think participation requirements need to be restructured. The government tries to group all benefit recipients into one basket without considering employment barriers. There are a lot of parents who are homeless because benefits do not even cover housing expenses. Each participation requirement should be on a case by case basis."

"I think it works great"

"Maybe to have more programs available to bridge the gap between TANF and employment. For an Example, the Community Jobs program is prefect- but a lot of TANF recipients do not qualify. Helping people on a case by case basis can really make a difference. It would really be nice is the WorkFirst Specialists can help make a connection (networking) bridge between their clients and employers. Helping people with more resources than just the general information etc."

"I wish that I could have more contact with my WorkFirst Specialist. My worker changed two times during my time on the program and I was never even notified or contacted by the WorkFirst Specialists who were handling my case. It would have been nice to know who to contact and how to reach them if I had a problem. A phone call or letter would be sufficient."

"I am grateful that I receive help with gas, but it's really not enough. It costs me 10.00 a day to get jaden to where he needs to be and get me to WorkSource. So really 10.00 a day is a lot. So i think it would be great if DSHS would account for where different people live then assist them accordingly. Like for someone that lives 10 min from WorkSource, should not get the same amount as me when It takes me about 1 hour to get here."

"Group of fellow peers to discuss everyday issues, to gain insight on how to manage time, money, family, and job. Learn how others have benefitted from the program, how we can benefit. What makes a successful participant."

"You could have no more attendance reports, instead maybe work together and have teachers EMAIL if a student doesn't show up or is late!! It's a huge waste of paper"

"More time at home with children. The state will pay for someone else to watch our children, why not insure that children are spending enough time with parents instead of sitting in daycare for 9 hours a day."

"Helping single parents with school issues. (my son wanted to get his G.E.D And he completed because of the help of his teachers and his mom)"